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SUBJECT: PDAS RIES DISCUSSES AFGHANISTAN, CONGO, RUSSIA
WITH BELGIAN MOD OFFICIAL

REF: BRUSSELS 1496

Classified By: Political-Economic Counselor Richard Eason, reason 1.4(b)
) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Marcie Ries met on November 5 with Vincent Mertens de Vilmars, Director for International Relations at the Ministry of Defense of Belgium. Mertens is a close advisor of Minister of Defense Pieter De Crem and a former Ambassador to Russia from Belgium. Mertens described Belgium's gradually increasing participation in ISAF operations in Afghanistan, including extending its mission of F-16's in Kandahar by six months and sending of an Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (OMLT) in January. He described Minister De Crem's efforts to educate and gain support for Belgium's Afghanistan missions from skeptical members of Parliament. Mertens advocated setting firm limits for Russia after its intervention in Georgia, but still advocated continued economic and social contacts. He sees a strong possibility of Russian intervention in the Crimea. He thinks the OSCE is the best forum for a coordinated response to President Medvedev's proposals for a new security structure in Europe. Like the U.S., Belgium is sending its top diplomats to the Congo and Rwanda to seek a solution to the crisis in the Eastern Congo. Belgium is wary of involvement in an armed intervention if there is not a clear structure for it and a reasonable chance of success. End Summary.

¶2. (C) PDAS Ries' meeting with Mertens took place the same day that Defense Minister Pieter De Crem obtained approval of his plans for Belgium's military activities in 2009 from the "kerncabinet" of senior ministers. Approval by the full cabinet should be a formality, following review by Belgium's financial control commission. The kerncabinet in most respects approved the missions outlined to emboffs in an earlier meeting with Mertens de Vilmars (reftel). Defense Minister De Crem provided a copy of his proposal to the kerncabinet under cover of a letter dated November 4 which is being faxed/mailed to EUR/WE.

CONFIRMATION OF AFGHANISTAN COMMITMENT

¶3. (C) Mertens told PDAS Ries that the term of Belgium's mission of four F-16's will be extended by six months, from February 2009 to August 2009, involving 100 troops. The sending of an Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team was approved. The OMLT should include about 20 trainers and 50 support troops, and will deploy in January 2009 to Kabul and from there to Kunduz in April. The GOB will maintain its 24-man participation in the Provincial Reconstruction Team led by the Germans in Kunduz. Mertens remarked that because of roadside bombs, the PRT team in the supposedly safer north is subjected to more danger than the F-16 crews in Kandahar.

The GOB is ready to send a maximum of 20 crewmembers to man AWACS planes when that mission is approved by NATO, Mertens said. Belgium is also continuing its support and protection of Kabul Airport with a force totaling 310 troops.

¶4. (C) De Crem's plans for Afghanistan have met with stiff criticism in Parliament from leftist parties that complain the trend of the MOD's activities is "too Atlanticist" and detracts from a balance between Belgium's engagement in UN and NATO operations. Mertens noted that De Crem has visited Afghanistan four times, the latest in October when he went with the Belgian minister for development assistance and ten members of Parliament who have been skeptical of Belgium's more active role in Afghanistan. Mertens said that it is unlikely that the parliamentarians changed their minds entirely, but once on the ground they were positively impressed by the attention paid to the safety of the troops and the degree of organization of the mission. The Minister argues to skeptics that Belgium's mission, especially in training troops, is bringing the day closer when the Afghans can handle their own security. Mertens added that the Minister is taking a "prudent" approach to building up Belgium's role, saying that the intention is to evaluate the results of the first OMLT over a year's time and then, if all goes well, to send a second one. Mertens expressed satisfaction that the situation in Afghanistan is evolving politically. While the GOB has been critical of President Karzai's ability to fight corruption and lawlessness, he has recently changed his government and acknowledged the need to curb corruption. Mertens was also encouraged by a "day of peace" that was recently declared in Kabul, saying it shows that some on the Taliban side are ready to talk. He looks forward to working with General Petraeus.

CONCERN ABOUT RUSSIAN INTENTIONS TOWARD UKRAINE

¶5. (C) PDAS Ries observed that after its intervention in Georgia, Russia is in an isolated and uncomfortable position. The Russians, she said, are not in compliance with the Sarkozy-negotiated ceasefire agreement and need to be reminded to comply. Mertens, who until 2008 was Belgium's ambassador to Moscow, responded, "every day". Ries added that the USG and EU should press Russia to allow access for EU monitors to South Ossetia and Abkhazia and allow progress at the Geneva talks. Mertens said that he expects the Geneva discussions will last a long time, just as has been the case with the conflicts themselves. Russia's entry into Georgian territory was a surprise and transformed the conflict between Russia and Georgia into a conflict between Russia and the West, he observed, adding that each time the USG and EU compromise, Russia takes a step further. We need to set firm limits, which is not an easy task for the European Union, he said. At the same time, he continued, we need to preserve as many contacts in the economic and social sphere as possible. Mertens added that there is little sympathy for Georgian President Saakashvili in the GOB. The GOB supports a German proposal for an objective study of the origins of the August war, which he believes would be helpful.

¶6. (C) Mertens said that Belgium has offered to participate in the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia, but wants to wait until after the first rotation of monitors. He said it was necessary to get the monitors into Georgia as soon as possible, but now it is important to define their mission. There is no shortage of monitors compared to the need for monitoring, he thinks, and they can take up duties such as advising the police and border guards. As for Georgia's chances for a Membership Action Plan, Mertens sees a consensus taking shape in NATO that "nothing special will happen" at the foreign ministers meeting in December. However, he said, the ministers will need to work out a communique that offers some steps in the direction of membership to Georgia and Ukraine, showing that we are one step beyond Bucharest. Ries stressed to Mertens that NATO cannot give Russia a sense of victory. Mertens agreed, and added that he is worried that serious problems will soon

arise in the Crimea. It is unfortunate, Mertens said, that Ukraine has a difficult internal political situation that interferes with obtaining a view of how to solve the problem. At the same time, the U.S. and Europeans should make clear their intentions and their commitment to see Ukraine through a challenge from Russia.

¶ 17. (C) Mertens continued that Medvedev's ideas of a new security arrangement for Europe are an attempt to gain a voice in EU, NATO and even U.S. councils, with the hope of obtaining a veto. He said the EU Presidency and the USG are consulting on an appropriate response. The GOB prefers that it come in the OSCE, he said. It is important to ensure that basic principles are safeguarded and that there is clear agreement between the USG and the EU on the approach to take.

However, utilizing the OSCE in this case is difficult, since the Russians have just about given up on the 1975 Helsinki commitments and the CFE. In Merten's view, the basic reason for rejecting CFE is that those commitments tied the Russian's hands in the Caucasus. They believe that having good relations with the EU and with NATO, they don't need the OSCE. Corollary to that, they are pushing hard for Partnership and Cooperation Agreement talks with the EU. Mertens concluded that his experience in Moscow is that all the Russian leadership is on the same political line and want to see an even stronger Russia. They feel better because they feel they gained respect from their actions in Georgia and they may be tempted to do the same in Ukraine.

WAREY OF INVOLVEMENT IN CONGO

¶ 18. (C) Turning to the Congo crisis, Mertens said that Belgium is reluctant to use force in the Kivus if there is no structure, no government and no chance of success. PDAS Ries said that the United States is making a big diplomatic push, including sending A/S Frazer, to the region. Mertens replied that Belgium is doing so as well, sending out its Foreign Minister and Ambassador to the Congo. He is concerned that Nkonda's rebels may try to take Goma, where the Belgians are delivering humanitarian aid. MONUC must be strengthened, he said, but the chances for that do not look good. The Congolese Army also needs to be reformed and trained, Mertens said. Belgium has been training a rapid reaction force for

the Congolese, but Mertens believes an OMLT-like training mission is needed to provide discipline and keep the troops under control.

¶ 19. (U) PDAS Ries has cleared this message.

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